Tips for Applying to Graduate School
Utah State University
(check with other programs about
their specific requirements and preferences)

- Get a high score on the GRE or MAT. You can take both exams more than once. Study tips: bone up on basic math and college algebra; read a good dictionary, vocabulary builder, or do crossword puzzles to improve vocabulary. Use the study guides. Practice so that you are familiar with the test format. [caveat: we know about the evidence that GRE scores do not predict graduate school performance. Please do not argue with program directors about this. Most times, it's a requirement of the graduate school/institution and we can't do anything about it. Take the MAT if you did not do well on the GRE. The low GRE scores will not be used if the MAT is adequate.]

- Get practical experience with children and families.

- Read materials carefully and respond to each part exactly; limit extra material

- Type everything you send, using a font no smaller than Times New Roman 12; don't use fancy fonts.

- Decide what you want from graduate school: clinical training, preparation for doctoral programs or teaching in a university, training in research, geography, money (costs), prestige, working with kids or special populations, etc.

- Know the difference between MFT, social work, counseling, psychology, etc. Talk to professionals in the field as well as faculty in programs. Know why and be able to articulate your preferences. Fit is very important because clinical professions are different.

- Think about the quality, location, and costs of programs to which you apply.

- Look on the AAMFT website for possible accredited schools: www.aamft.org

- Read the materials carefully – know what you are getting into.

- Email or call the program director with your questions after you have read the materials. Personal contact is a good thing, but not necessary in all cases.

- Ask for a list of current graduate students and their email addresses. Email them and ask a few specific questions.

- Find out where recent graduates are working.

- Read the materials carefully and do what is requested.

- Write the essay exactly as requested for each school. It is obvious when essays have been written for other schools, then copied. Don't get moralistic or preachy.

- If you are applying to doctoral programs, carefully detail your research interests and experience as well as faculty with whom you would like to work. Remember that accredited doctoral education is primarily for training for teaching in MFT programs and conducting research. Advanced clinical training can found in other ways.

- Get to know the research interests and publications of the faculty at the programs to which you are applying. Demonstrate your similar interests.

- Don't list John Bradshaw or John Gray as great MFTs that you've read. Learn something about MFT if you haven't had a course of introduction. Read Nichols & Schwartz, The Contemporary Context of Family Therapy (undergraduate) or Family Therapy Concepts and Methods (graduate) for an excellent overview.

- Letters of recommendation:
  - Ask program directors about their preferences. Typically, with three letters, two should be from people who can speak to your academic ability (no more than 1 TA) and one from someone who can speak to your aptitude as a "people" person. Four letters are acceptable. Some programs prefer letters for which the candidate has waived rights to read; others are the opposite.

  - Ask the person if they are willing to write you a "good," "solid," or "excellent" letter. If they can't write a terrific letter, thank them nicely and find someone else.

  - Give potential referees information that will help them: GRE or other entrance scores, GPA on last 2 years of coursework, copies of papers you have written for them, copy of resume, etc. Ask them what they would like. This is especially important if you did not get to know any professors well or if it's been a long time since they saw you in class.

  - If you want them to speak to particular interests, accomplishments, or abilities, tell them so. Most programs look for people who are smart, grasp new concepts quickly, are able to apply and integrate information, are enthusiastic about marriage and family therapy, and relate well to people. Programs with research emphases want to know about research interests, experience, and abilities.

  - Give recommenders plenty of time to write the letter, but remember that most people are very busy from late November through December. It's a good idea to ask them if they have written the letter about a week before the due date. If they have not, ask them nicely if they think they are going to be able to and be ready to find someone else.

- Similarly, if you discover that the school has not received a letter, contact the person and tell them it has not been received. Don't make it sound like you are accusing them of not doing it – it really could have been a mail problem. Ask them to fax a copy of the letter to the school and give them the fax number.

- Check with the places you have sent the materials to see if they have arrived. Note that some programs want materials sent to more than one place (e.g., the graduate school or admissions committee; the program director). Graduate schools and admissions committees at larger universities are very busy around due dates; be patient when you call and count to 30 before you say anything if they say that your materials have not arrived or that they cannot find them. With hundreds of applications, it's easy to mislay a transcript or two. As pleasantly as possible, ask what you should do and how you can expedite their receiving materials. Don't argue that school so-and-so got your GRE scores and so this school must have. Simply ask if you can fax your copy of the scores while they are waiting for the official ones. Notify program directors of difficulties; they may or may not be able to help, but at least they'll be alerted.

- Did I mention that you should read the application materials carefully and follow the instructions exactly? When in doubt, email or phone the program director and ask questions (after reading their published materials carefully – don't waste their time or yours with questions that are already answered). If the director doesn't have time to talk with you or make an appointment to talk, you might wonder about how available the faculty will be after you get there.

- Remember that the foundational education you get in graduate school is very important. You should feel good about the quality of the education you are receiving as well as the experience itself – are the faculty available, friendly, professional? Does it "feel" like a place you can do this very hard work and feel supported?

- Some people look at geography, wanting to stay near home or in the east or west, etc. Remember that grad school is just a few years out of your lifetime and balance geography with quality of program and fit between you and the program.

- Don't be discouraged if you are not selected for your first choice program. Remember that our field is competitive and there are many reasons good applicants are selected or deselected for programs: fit with marriage and family therapy, fit with the particular program, qualifications relative to the rest of the pool of applicants. If you are not selected and your passion is MFT, be persistent! Ask what you can do to improve your application, then do it; try again; try elsewhere.

- Once a program has invited you, take some time to think about it. It's absolutely awful when applicants accept an invitation and then change their minds. It's flattering to be accepted, but you really need to feel good about your decision or things will not go well.

- Once you've made the decision to go to a school, stay committed to the decision. If you

change your mind late in the process, you may be shutting some other person out of the opportunity.

- If you have any other tips, please share them!